The hesitations of history

"Swagat hai mere dost! Why did it take so long? We have been waiting for you for 70 years," Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told [Narendra Modi](#) when the latter visited Israel in July last year. Netanyahu was right. It took 70 years after Independence for an Indian prime minister to set foot on Israel, and 25 years after India became the last major country to establish full diplomatic ties with that country in 1992.

On their part, Israelis have always shown enormous interest in this relationship. Ezer Weizman, the then President of Israel, visited India in 1997. Ariel Sharon, as prime minister, came to India in September 2003. Several ministerial-level visits began happening from both sides. Modi too visited Israel in 2006 as chief minister of Gujarat. He introduced several Israeli technologies in areas like water management and agriculture in Gujarat.

Finally, as PM, Modi didn't disappoint the Israelis. He became the first Indian prime minister to visit Israel, ending a seven-decade embargo. As prime ministers, Modi and Netanyahu met first at New York in 2014. It is worth recalling that history.

Prime Minister Modi's maiden United Nations speech happened on September 17, 2014. He was scheduled to leave the US on September 29. Netanyahu was to speak on September 30. Under normal circumstances, a meeting between the two would not have been possible. But the two leaders had shown not only a strong desire to meet, but also a willingness to overrule their respective diplomatic establishments, ever-ready with precedents and protocols. That finally led to their meeting on September 28.

For Netanyahu, it meant advancing his US visit by 48 hours. He arrived in New York on that afternoon. For Modi, it was a break from the established convention, that whenever the Indian leadership meets with their Israeli counterparts, they should necessarily balance it with a meeting with the Palestine authorities. President Mahmoud Abbas of Palestine had delivered his speech at the UN on September 26 and returned. No meeting between him and Modi was possible. Going by convention, the Indian foreign ministry had even informed the Israeli side that the Modi-Netanyahu meeting wouldn't be possible. It was PM Modi who overruled his mandarins and went ahead with the meeting.

In fact, when this departure from the established convention was happening, none of us pushing for it had any idea that it would result in a major policy shift, popularly known as de-hyphenation.

De-hyphenation doesn't mean the exclusion of any country. On the contrary, it helps in establishing ties with nations on strong bilateral foundations. Our ties with Palestine will be guided by bilateral interests, not to be influenced by our relations with any third country, including Israel. PM Modi will embark on a stand alone visit to Palestine too, at an appropriate time.

By saying "we are waiting for 70 years", Netanyahu drove home a very profound point. India and Israel have several things in common that should have made them natural friends. Both were former British colonies. Both had to endure a civil war-like situation as soon as they became independent — Israelis with Palestinians and Indians with Pakistanis. Both had risen as democratic nations in an undemocratic neighbourhood. Also, both have been the perpetual victims of Islamic terrorism. Yet, India adopted a hostile attitude towards Israel from the beginning. We had voted against its entry into the UN in 1949, refused full diplomatic ties, and always supported Palestine at the UN.

Nehru's romantic foreign policy, of which anti-Zionism is an integral part, was largely responsible

for this attitude. All that the Zionist movement, under Theodor Herzl, wanted was: "Let them give us sovereignty over a piece of land on the earth's surface, just sufficient for the needs of our people."

It is surprising that the Indian leadership, which was willingly granting a large piece of its territory for the creation of Pakistan, would come to oppose this "collective longing" of the Jews, as Shimon Peres calls it in his book No Room for Small Dreams. Even [Mahatma Gandhi](#) would insist: "Palestine belongs to the Arabs in the same sense that England belongs to the English or France to the French. It is wrong and inhuman to impose the Jews on the Arabs."

Seventy years hence, history has done a U-turn. In Jerusalem, Modi by his side, Netanyahu declared: "We are very excited by the prospects of greater and greater ties with India. We think the sky's the limit", adding that "We are two old peoples, some of the oldest in the nations on earth but we are also two democracies; we're proud of our rich traditions but we're also eager to seize the future."

India has a great future to seize. And great lessons to learn. Israel is a country that paid a heavy price for its freedom, knows the value of it and hence guards it zealously. Amos Oz narrates in Exodus how thousands of youths had sacrificed their lives fighting, with a meagre war ration of "a piece of bread, a cup of tea, thrice a day". Most importantly, in Israel, we are dealing with a nation of eternal optimists. "If you come across an expert who says 'impossible', look for another expert," the founding father of the Jewish nation, David Ben-Gurion used to say.